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DE RUEHSL #0109/01 0711038
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 111038Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY BRATISLAVA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1583

UNCLAS BRATISLAVA 000109

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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EUR/NCE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [LO](#)

SUBJECT: GOS ROLLS OUT ROMA STRATEGY

¶11. (SBU) Summary. The Government of Slovakia has new EU-provided funding and increased staff in the office of Deputy Prime Minister Dusan Caplovic (Smer) to dramatically upgrade programs that address the needs of the Roma community. Roma activists and other observers are very skeptical, however, that Roma-oriented programs will be implemented effectively in practice. Key ministries -- especially those run by the Slovak National Party (SNS) -- have indicated that they will ignore the Roma policy suggestions of the DPM's staff and/or object to the way that EU funds are approved through the DPM's office. Given the weak and generally passive position of the divided Roma community and its lack of strong allies, the government will have to be convinced to use its political capital on a not-so-popular issue in order for its plan to translate into concrete results. Embassy Bratislava will continue to press the issue with the government and to seek opportunities through which we can further the goal of Roma integration.
End Summary.

The Action Plan

¶12. (SBU) On January 11, the DPM's Plenipotentiary for Roma Affairs, Anina Botosova, announced the government's updated National Minority Strategy (NMS). A wide-ranging strategy document, the NMS incorporated many of the Roma advocacy community's policy suggestions on a wide range of education, employment, housing, social integration and other policy. Key points include: making kindergarten a part of the formal education, requiring 12 years of schooling obligatory, providing teacher's assistants to all schools with a high Roma population; upgrading adult education; establishing incentives to employers for training the long-term unemployed; defining housing rights; and, establishing better-equipped community centers. In a recent meeting with Ambassador Obsitnik, Roma policy analyst Stefan Sarkozy called the NMS "the best plan the government has ever made for addressing the needs of the Roma community...on paper."

EU Funds: Changing the Dynamic

¶13. (SBU) Normally the plenipotentiary's NMS would be minor news, since the office does not have discretionary authority over federal funds or the ability to draft legislation. In this case, however, the NMS was released at a time when the plenipotentiary's office has gained leverage to influence how 2007-2013 eurofunds are targeted toward Roma program initiatives. Under an agreement with the EU originally negotiated in 2006 by former Plenipotentiary Klara Orgovanova, Slovakia is required to target a minimum of 8 billion SK (260 million Euro) out of its 400 billion SK (13 billion Euro) in 2007-2013 Eurofunds toward inter-ministerial projects proposed by municipalities to address the needs of the Roma community. The Plenipotentiary's office, run by a

Roma woman (Botosova) and with largely Roma staff, will have the authority to reject proposals that do not meet the objectives outlined by the NMS. To encourage positive Roma-oriented projects from municipalities, the EU gave the plenipotentiary's office funds to hire 35 new staff members, many of whom will work in the eastern and central provinces. Most of the new staff has been hired in the past six months. The first calls for proposals were issued in January.

Resistance in the (SNS) Ministries

14. (SBU) It is still questionable how much power over EU funds the plenipotentiary really has. The DPM and plenipotentiary have authority to cut inappropriate pork barrel projects proposed in the name of the Roma community, but they do not have a means of specifically targeting funds toward the NMS's most important education, housing, and employment objectives. Moreover, Roma policy has the potential to become a pawn in the battle between the DPM's Smer party and junior partner SNS over control of all Eurofunds. On February 6, Caplovic introduced a proposal that would remove overall coordination of eurofunds from the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development -- run by Marian Janusek of SNS -- to Prime Minister Fico's office. Janusek responded by saying that none of the three SNS-run ministries (Housing and Regional Development, Environment, and Education) would comply with the new arrangement proposed. All three of these ministries are key distributors of EU funds targeted toward the Roma community. (Among the ministries with significant policy initiatives affecting the Roma community, only Labor ad Social Affairs is run by Smer.)

Hard to Change Policy

15. (SBU) SNS-run ministries are also proving non-responsive to the government's proposals on key issues affecting the Roma community in which policy change (rather than increased EU or federal funding) is required. The Ministry of Education's draft education bill, issued in early January, elicited 22 major criticisms from Botosova, only one of which was addressed. Key concerns included the bill's lack of proposals to address the high percentage of Roma in special education schools, to provide incentives to encourage Roma/low-income children to enter kindergarten, or to provide additional teachers, among other proposals. In a January 23 courtesy call meeting with Ambassador Obsitnik, Minister Jan Mikolaj strongly defended the system by which children are screened for entry into special schools, saying "Our special schools are the best in the world." He did not appear open to or interested in change on these points. Later this year, the Ministries of Environment and Housing and Regional Development are scheduled to produce major legislation on access to water and housing policy, respectively. Botosova told Poloff that she and her supervisor, Caplovic, will have similar problems exerting any influence on these draft bills.

Up to the Challenge?

16. (SBU) While resistance from SNS is a given, the Roma community faces the more serious long-term question of whether it has the will and the skill to press for serious policy changes or funding increases. DPM Caplovic and Botosova have a cordial relationship (in contrast to the tense relationship between DPM and plenipotentiary in years past before Botosova was appointed in June 2007), but Roma activists express concern that both are too deferential to be effective advocates. As one former colleague of Botosova from her days in the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs told Poloff, "she is very nice and she knows how the ministries work, which is great. She is definitely qualified for the job...but she is incredibly disorganized, she gets nervous, and has a hard time finishing anything." Several qualified upper-level analysts have already left the plenipotentiary's office in the last few months, expressing exasperation with a dysfunctional office.

¶ 7. (SBU) Caplovic has not yet been willing to confront any of his coalition colleagues over policy proposals and has thus far been content to leave his programs on auto pilot. Some believe, however, that the current spat with SNS over eurofunds has the potential to motivate him to press more strongly for Roma-related programs. As former plenipotentiary Orgovanova (no friend of Caplovic) told Poloff, "He doesn't like SNS and he doesn't want them challenging his authority or deciding how to spend money. This is the only way to get his attention." In the end, Caplovic (or Fico) will have to take a stronger role, because no political party has lent support to the Roma community, and there are no Roma representatives in parliament or in high-ranking roles in the ministries.

¶ 8. (SBU) Comment and Conclusion. Mindful of the challenges, Post continues to dedicate both human and financial resources in an effort to raise the profile of Roma issues and to make concrete contributions to the community. The topic of Roma integration is addressed frequently by the Embassy with a range of Slovak interlocutors, including at the ministerial level. In addition, Post has recently awarded a grant to a Slovak NGO that is working at the grassroots level to prepare the youngest Roma to enter the Slovak school system. We also are preparing a conference on long-term unemployment that will, among other things, highlight the successful efforts of companies such as Whirlpool to hire and train Roma workers. In a recent roundtable hosted by the Embassy for a group of dynamic young Roma activists, we caught a poignant glimpse of the great potential and the deep frustration that co-exist within the Roma community here. The event served as both an inspiration and a reminder as to why sustained and creative engagement on this issue continues to make sense, even in a time of significantly reduced resources.

OBSITNIK